

Historians to shed light on French landing

By William Zilke
Heritage Newspapers

The Belleville Area Historical Society will present the first ever tour of the French Landing Powerhouse from noon to 5 p.m. on Aug 29, at Van Buren Township's French Landing Park on Haggerty Road south of I-94.

Only the inclusion of a depot in Belleville in the 1880s reshaped the region as much as the building of the Detroit Edison Dam and Powerhouse that flooded the deep Huron River gorge at Belleville and created Belleville Lake in 1925.

In 1924 city of Belleville as we know it now would be unrecognizable to us. A downtown crowded with small businesses lined the city's central thoroughfare leading to the depot on South Street.

Horses were still very much in use. Workhorses were still pulling wagons of families, farm produce, tradesmen or milk cans from the landlocked creamery over on North

Liberty

A few WWI veterans – injured in the War to End All Wars – and pensioners sat outside the city's two hotels, debating the bobbed hair and knee length skirts of young women who were stern Victorian ladies only a few years ago.

On the south edge of town, on the old Wabash Line, milk containers and train passengers on their way to Wayne or points east, connected to Detroit were picked up in the morning. In the evening, empty milk containers were picked up by dairies or farmers and tired workers, just as they do now, returned from larger towns after one more day of work. More tired and drained than when they left in the morning.

There was no expressway, few paved roads outside the city's immediate downtown and most noticeably, no Belleville Lake.

The Huron River, running through on the northern border of the city, is a deep gorge and little more than a large

stream.

People were still pulling licenses for clamping on the river for food and their mother of pearl shells were used for buttons. Cemetery Point, where Hillside Cemetery is now, was a garbage dump for the town and immediate area. Most people still buried or burned garbage at home.

Over in the township on the old River Road, now known as East Huron River Drive, the Detroit Reduction Company was still carting in flat cars of raw garbage from the city of Detroit.

"One method of disposal was burying it," historian Diane Wilson said. "It created great ponds of 'stink water' and was left half treated where it lay."

In spite of the awful odor, there was a general store and a train stop there. At one time the area boasted its own school district.

In 1924, work on the dam had begun but the Eastern

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LANDING

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Michigan Edison Company had started buying up property in the area the area as early as 1905.

Most of the land needed to be flooded had been bought up by 1910. A cement bridge replaced the iron bridge built in 1889 and a way of life and its history were to disappear forever.

"Several dams and Ford Lake were created along the Huron River when the power station was created at French Landing," Wilson said. "Ford Farms was built where the Quirk farms were. Henry Ford owned the first home on Harmony Lane."

The once land-locked creamery now found a newly formed lake at its back door.

In 1931, Roger and Mae Doane bought the familiar, longstanding entry way landmark, where Doane's Landing Park now stands. It was later converted it into a marina.

"It put major portions of French Landing, Rawsonville and even Belleville underwater," Van Buren Township historian Cathy Horste said.

The lake became a vacation destination point for laborers

in Detroit and Toledo.

"Many people go their first automobiles in the 1920s and we're not far from Michigan Avenue," Wilson said. "There are some homes on Huron River Drive that started out as vacation cottages. Now the new additions to the homes face the lake."

The dam continued to generate up to 12.7 million kilowatts until its decommission in 1962. It was eventually donated to the Township.

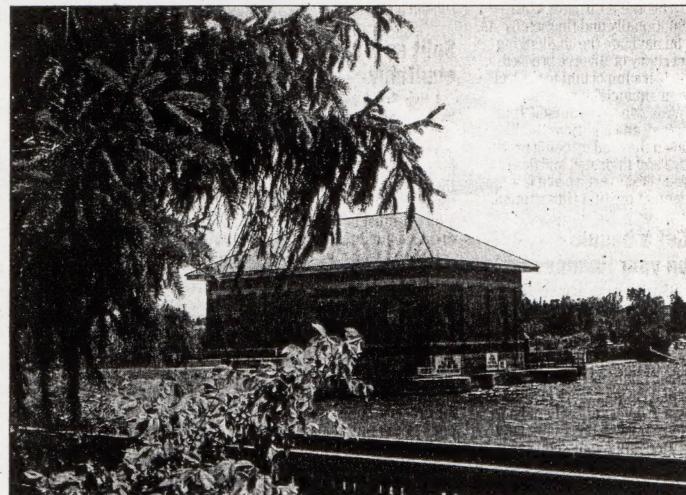
The dam and lake continued to reshape the area into the 1960s when the paths of East Huron River and Haggerty Road were once again changed in the 1960s.

In 1973, the lake was partially drained and the old Cemetery Point dumping ground revealed submerged relics of the Victorian age, specifically silverware and bottles.

Contrary to popular belief, no bodies of gruesomely murdered victims were found. That's just one of many urban legends area historians regularly hear.

In 1981, Van Buren Township commissioned a \$5 million project to restore the dam and powerhouse.

Wilson and Horste are co-authors of "Water Under the



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Bridge: A History of Van Buren Township." A third edition is available at the Belleville Area History Museum, 405 Main Street in Belleville.

Tickets cost \$10 for those 16 and older, \$5 for those 6 to 15, and free for kids younger than five.

Tickets are available from Township Clerk Leon Wright, the Belleville Area Museum, the Belleville Chamber of Commerce, the City of Belleville's Treasurer's office, the Fred C. Fischer Library and Barber Bob's.

On Oct. 10, the Historical Society will take another look at a couple other local urban legends in their tour, "Who's in the Soop? A Haunted History Tour."

Trained docents will lead guests to 34 historic graves in the Township's oldest cemetery, later renamed Pleasant View.

"They will see and hear the stories of the people who founded our township. We have soldiers there from every war including the Revolutionary War," Horste said.

For more information call the museum 697-1944.

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